

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 21, 1969

Hijacking

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *HK*

SUBJECT: TWA Hijacking

Attached is a cable from American Embassy Tel Aviv which provides an excellent assessment of continuing Israeli concern about the TWA hijacking. In summary, the following points are made:

- There is little discernible forward motion towards obtaining release of the two Israeli passengers still held by Syria.
- A violent Israeli public reaction with dangerous repercussions for TWA and the US could occur if the TWA pilot departed from Damascus.
- It will become increasingly difficult to convince Israel that relying on the US is the best way to gain release of the two prisoners.
- Israel may attack a prominent target like the Damascus airport if it concludes that the two Israelis will never be released.

The Ambassador warns, and I concur, that we must intensify efforts to gain the release of the two prisoners, preferably prior to the visit of Prime Minister Meir next Thursday. He recommends specifically that we:

- I agree*
- prevent the election of Syria to the Security Council.
- I agree*
- warn other governments (especially the Soviets) and international organizations that we are losing patience and are seriously considering strong diplomatic sanctions against Syria.

Attachment

Follow through
Embassy Tel Aviv's 3588, September 18.

DECLASSIFIED
PA/HO, Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
June 22, 2004

~~SECRET~~

Message from American Embassy Tel Aviv (no. 3588)
dated September 18, 1969

SUBJECT: TWA Hijacking: Three Weeks Later

1. After the initial success in obtaining the release of the first of the non-Israelis, and then of Israeli women, the problem of the two Israeli men detained in Damascus has remained, with little if any forward motion discernible. After a strong protest from the United States Government, the Israeli public and governmental outcry was moderated, but deep concern for the two Israelis still remains immediately below the surface and could break out at any time into violent public problem again. Departure of the TWA Captain without the release of the passengers would, we believe, cause another outbreak of outrage against the "abandonment" of the passengers by the airline which had, in return for the fare, undertaken responsibilities towards them. TWA should not be under any misapprehension that the situation has quieted down to the point where the Captain could leave Damascus without adverse reaction. We continue to hear bitter comments from Israelis about the departure of the rest of the crew, and the departure of the Captain would have repercussions on TWA (and also on the US Government) beyond any disadvantages or inconveniences involved in the Captain's remaining in Damascus.

2. The Secretary's letter to Eban was delivered on September 14 in time for Eban to use it in his Cabinet discussion on the morning of September 15 before his departure for the United Nations General Assembly. We believe the letter was useful to Eban in gaining Cabinet agreement to continue the Government of Israel's policy of relying on the US Government to get the men out. The time is approaching, however, when we will need something more substantial if we are to persuade the Israelis that the present course of action is the one best calculated to obtain the men's release. Every indication (although this not necessarily is to be accepted as final, of course) has been that the Government of Israel will not entertain the idea of an exchange of the Syrian pilots for the Israeli passengers. In the Algerian case, an exchange was made because the Government of Israel saw no other way out. Many have feared this set precedent, and are determined the precedent will not be reinforced. If and when the time comes that Israel concludes the US Government has given up on the passengers or

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that the US Government efforts will not work, we must not rule out the possibility of Israel resorting to violent action. It is true that some Israelis have come, with hindsight, to view the Beirut airport raid as a possible mistake or at least excessive. These feelings are not based, however, on a lack of appreciation for the operation itself, but more on the relatively mild attitude of Lebanon in the Arab-Israel controversy and the relatively tenuous connection between Beirut and Athens airport murder. These factors will not operate in the case of Syria. Once they have concluded that the Israelis will not be released anyway, the Government of Israel may opt for a military attack on the new Damascus airport or some other prominent objective. If and when such a time comes, it will be because the Israelis have despaired of any other means and nothing the US Government says at that time would be likely to dissuade them.

3. We therefore urge immediate attention to a new hard-hitting campaign aimed at getting the Israelis out of Damascus by some specific date, such as September 24 arrival of Prime Minister Meir in the United States. To accomplish this would make for a less troubled and distracting atmosphere during Mrs. Meir's visit. Otherwise, this problem, still hanging over our heads at that time, may put us in a defensive position on a matter of great public interest in Israel and cloud what we hope will be a great positive contribution to US-Israeli relations.

4. Other than doing something to prevent a Syrian election to the Security Council, we do not have any specific steps to recommend. It would appear desirable, however, to go again to the Soviets and other governments as well as international organizations which may have influence in Syria and make it clear that the US is at the end of its patience and will be bound to take strong action against Syria in every way possible, regardless of consequences to things like overflight rights and air service to Syria, in order to protect the principle that the US Government will not stand for kidnapping and illegal detention of passengers on US flag aircraft.